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STATE FOR SA/INS

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TAGS: PGOV PTER EAID CE LTTE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PROPOSED JOINT MECHANISM NOW POLITICAL

HOT POTATO

REF: COLOMBO 0834

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) Hopes that the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) would sign a joint mechanism on tsunami aid before the May 16-17 Development Forum are fading. The proposal has become a political hot potato for President Chandrika Kumaratunga, with her opponents--including her Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) coalition partners--using it to attack her and the LTTE pointing to her delay in signing the agreement as proof of her insincerity. The President's failure to vet the proposal adequately with other parties and influential players, including India, may be partially responsible for her current dilemma. Although some critics believe that the President never intended to sign the agreement--and can now conveniently blame the JVP and others for scuttling it--she has told donors she plans to keep trying--and only needs a few weeks more to bring the JVP on board. Whatever her true intentions, the ugly, very public battle over the mechanism highlights ever more glaringly the difficulty of securing a southern political consensus on this important issue. End summary.

MECHANISM MOOTED;
NO TAKERS

¶12. (SBU) Although informal discussion of a possible "joint mechanism" between the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on tsunami aid has been kicking around Colombo for several months, President Chandrika Kumaratunga waited until the end of April to begin publicly promoting the proposal. She chose her inaugural remarks at a development project in Colombo District on April 29 to first broach the controversial topic, telling the crowd that she was sure her Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) coalition partners would not oppose the agreement. The President followed up this initial salvo with an appeal for the support of religious leaders, telling religious committee members of the National Advisory Council for Peace and Reconciliation on May 3 that she would press for the joint mechanism even if her government falls and she loses the presidency (Reftel). Stressing that the LTTE had climbed down from an initial demand for a separate state to "a much more democratic mechanism to distribute tsunami relief," she asserted that at least 60 percent of the nation--including all of her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and most of the opposition United National Party (UNP)--support the proposal.

¶13. (C) According to one Embassy source, the President then asked the religious leaders present at the meeting to sign a statement endorsing the proposal. The participants demurred, asking first to see a copy of the draft agreement. The President reportedly told the clerics that she was unable to comply with their request, and the meeting ended inconclusively. The President met May 4 with bipartisan members of the Muslim Peace Secretariat, who, according to Secretary General Javid Yusuf, pressed for greater Muslim

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representation at the regional level. (Note: According to several interlocutors, the joint mechanism will operate at three levels: national, regional and district. The LTTE, GSL and Muslims will have one representative each at the national level; five, two and three respectively at the regional level; and only GSL representatives at the district level. End note.) Since the meeting, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) Leader Rauff Hakeem has made repeated public statements against the mechanism, complaining that the Muslim community was not adequately consulted during the drafting stage. The President also waited until May 4 to brief her increasingly out-of-the-loop Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and the Cabinet on the draft--but once again did not, apparently, give anyone in the Cabinet a copy of the document. According to one source in the Cabinet, two

Ministers representing small parties in the alliance--Urban Development Minister Dinesh Gunawardena of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna and Housing Minister Ferial Ashraff of the New Unity Alliance, a Muslim representing the eastern district of Ampara--objected to the proposal. (Note: JVP ministers had already walked out of the Cabinet meeting in protest over a separate matter--the proposed restructuring of the Ceylon Electricity Board--and thus did not participate in that briefing. End note.)

14. (SBU) On May 6 the President brought the proposal before her JVP partners, who promptly and very publicly shot it down. Local press reports quoted JVP MP Wimal Weerawansa as saying signing the mechanism was tantamount to recognizing the LTTE's claim for a separate state. At a May 10 rally to protest the mechanism, JVP Leader Somawansa Amarasinghe blamed the international community for pressuring the GSL to sign the agreement, lauding the example of Cuban President Castro, who "stands upright in the face of opposition and pressure from America." He asserted that India was also opposed to the mechanism and the potential threat it could pose to regional security. (Note: Another protest by the JVP-backed National Bhikku (monk) Front, is planned to be held in Colombo on May 15 in opposition both to the joint mechanism and the May 16-17 Development Forum in Kandy. When asked why the bhikkus did not elect to hold their protest in Kandy, a representative told us that the Buddhist leadership in Kandy forbade it. End note.) The President suffered a second rebuff on May 6 as the UNP flatly turned down her invitation to Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe to meet to discuss the draft agreement. In a letter released to the press, the UNP put the onus for pursuing the mechanism squarely on the President, indicating the party's support "once the government reaches a final agreement with the LTTE." When DCM told Bradman Weerakoon, a long-time UNP advisor that he believed the party had erred in not agreeing even to hear the President out, Weerakoon lamely responded that the President's invitation had been turned because it had not been sent through proper channels.

TAMPING DOWN DONOR EXPECTATIONS

15. (C) While meeting near-universal opposition on the domestic political front (from foes and purported allies alike), the President has also begun to brief members of the diplomatic community, in separate tranches, on the initiative. (Note: The DCM--who was Charge at the time--was initially invited to meet the President on May 10. The appointment was subsequently shifted to May 11 and then to May 13. As of COB May 13, the meeting had not taken place. End note.) According to a read-out from participants at the first such briefing on May 10 (which included the EU, Australia and Canada), the President said that she needed a few more weeks--i.e., well after the May 16-17 Development Forum in Kandy--to bring the JVP on board. Some participants believe that once the impending Forum is safely behind her, the pressure will be off the President to sign--and her two-week full-court press on the mechanism will fade away.

INDIAN VIEWS

16. (C) Many political analysts, perhaps picking up on the JVP's allusion to Indian objections, believe that the President did not properly vet the proposed mechanism with her Indian neighbors, who, resentful at not having been adequately consulted, are thus trying to scuttle it. (The Indians had been part of a SAARC Missions-only briefing on the topic with the President earlier in the week.) The President's still-unconfirmed plans to visit India this weekend are an attempt to smooth things out, several Sri Lankan contacts have suggested. Indian DCM Mohan Kumar dismissed such speculation in a May 12 conversation with DCM, however. The Indians will not try to stand in the way of an agreement or "scuttle" it ("as if we could") if all Sri Lankan parties agree to it, he asserted. That said, Kumar cited two Indian concerns about the mechanism. First, allocating the only slots reserved for Tamils at the national and regional level to the LTTE reinforces the Tigers' claim to be the sole representative of the Tamil people. Second, New Delhi is "shocked" that the mechanism would apply in government-controlled areas in the north and east as well--thereby giving the LTTE some degree of legitimacy in GSL-controlled areas. Instead, the Indian government believes the mechanism should have been drafted to apply exclusively to LTTE-controlled areas--a point, he said, his senior GSL interlocutors concede but view as too late to change.

17. (C) According to Kumar, in her meeting with SAARC envoys, the President said she was "strongly inclined" to go ahead with the mechanism--a significantly toned-down message from her May 3 speech before the religious leaders--and did

not mention the two-to-three week delay cited in her meeting with other Chiefs of Mission. Kumar said he believes the President will ultimately sign the mechanism to earn some points from the international community for political courage. New Delhi's concern, however, is that after signing the mechanism nothing will be done to implement it, he concluded.

COLOMBO CHATTERING CLASS GENERALLY SKEPTICAL

18. (C) A survey of contacts in the NGO community, academia, media and the opposition political arena reveals widespread skepticism that the mechanism will ever be signed. One cynical (but widely cited) assessment holds that the President never actually intended to sign it. According to this theory, President Kumaratunga went along with pursuing the agreement to curry international favor and to appear willing to risk political capital in the interests of peace/humanitarian aid--while knowing all along she could count on JVP opposition to keep the proposal from going too far. (An interesting variation on this theme sees the LTTE adopting more or less the same tactic--claiming support for the mechanism while relying on divisive Southern politics to prevent its adoption. The LTTE would thus be left free to reiterate its oft-repeated claim that the South is not serious about the peace process.) A significantly smaller group believes she genuinely supports the mechanism but will end up unable to overcome JVP opposition and thus not sign. Others, like the Indians, predict she will sign the agreement (perhaps accommodating JVP objections to the restructuring of the Ceylon Electricity Board in exchange for an assurance that the partner will not bolt from the government should she go through with the mechanism) but then fall down (whether because of JVP obstructionism or her own inattention) on implementation. In general, the bottom line among most non-GSL Sri Lankans we have talked to--even those who are convinced of her sincerity--is strong doubt that the document will ever be signed.

LTTE ALREADY FIXING BLAME

19. (SBU) If our contacts' prediction proves true and the President, for whatever reason, does not sign, the LTTE can be expected to try to capitalize on the situation. The May 12 edition of Sudar Oli, a pro-LTTE Tamil vernacular daily, carried an interview with Tiger political wing leader Thamilchelvan, who accused the GSL of "dragging this matter out while at the same time allowing opposing forces to get strengthened." While the Norwegian facilitators remain optimistic of securing an agreement, Thamilchelvan said, "the actions of the Sri Lankan government and the crisis among the alliance partners make us doubtful. Mrs. Kumaratunga is just issuing statements without doing anything constructive . . . as a strategy to convince the donors (so that she can) receive the aid." The GSL had squandered the opportunity presented by the tsunami to rebuild confidence by working with the LTTE, he charged, and the President had strengthened the JVP by making them partners in her government. Instead of working to find a permanent solution to the ethnic conflict, she had stopped humanitarian aid from reaching tsunami-affected people in LTTE-controlled areas, he alleged.

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COMMENT

10. (C) That the President waited so late in the day before seeking support for the proposed joint mechanism does not necessarily mean she is not sincere in wanting its passage; her well-known penchant for lateness is so pervasive that it influences her approach to many matters--even those important to her. That said, she is no political neophyte, and is too savvy a strategist to be surprised by the JVP's, the Muslims' and the UNP's response. The UNP, in particular, is unlikely to play any role in saving the President from her uncooperative alliance partner, and she knows it. Thus her claims, carried prominently in the local press, of "surprise and regret" at the UNP's lack of support seem a bit disingenuous.

11. (C) Comment (cont.): We believe that the President is sincere in principle about wanting some kind of rapprochement with the Tigers, whether through a joint mechanism or other vehicle, but may be unwilling to risk the political capital needed to muster multipartisan support for it. (Since risking political capital should be easier for a last-term president than one contemplating re-election, her reluctance to take such a gamble indicates she may still want to keep her options open.) Faced with vociferous opposition to the

mechanism on multiple fronts, she may just decide it is easier to let it go--especially once the Development Forum is behind her. Whatever she decides, the battle has been ugly enough and public enough to jeopardize the one benefit that signing the mechanism could have brought her--increased confidence from Tamils, LTTE and non-LTTE alike, in her ability to bring the South together to clinch a lasting settlement to the conflict.

LUNSTEAD